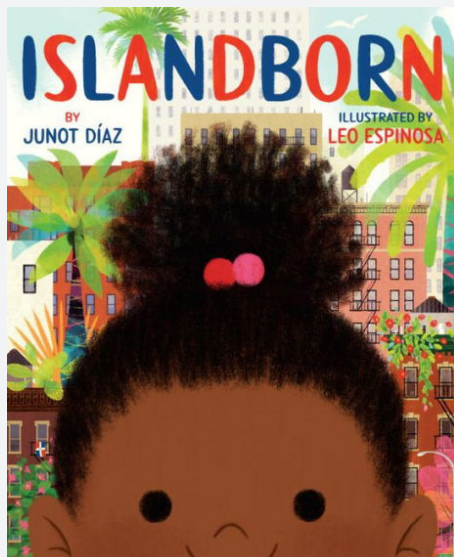


## First Opinion: Lola's Journey of Weaving Collective Memories of Home

Díaz, Junot. *Islandborn*. Illustrated by Leo Espinosa, Dial Books, 2018.

*Eun Hye Son*



*"The Island Is Me" (Díaz).*

When I'm asked where I'm originally from, I can proudly say I'm from South Korea, where the 2018 Winter Olympics were held; a cool K-Pop band, BTS, is from; where Samsung, LG, and Hyundai make high-quality electronics and cars; and so many other wonderful things. However, many immigrant children, like Lola in *Islandborn* (Díaz), do not know much about their heritage (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco). Some left their home when they were too little to remember anything, while others may not stay connected to the birthplace or heritage because they are too busy or stressed about adjusting to a new home. Many have a difficult time assimilating to a new culture because it often requires giving up what is familiar, beloved or standard.

"Just because you don't remember a place doesn't mean it's not in you" (Díaz unpagged). Lola's abuela comforts her when Lola feels bad about not remembering the island where she was born. This was never an issue in her life until her teacher, Ms. Obi, asks the students to draw a picture of their first home, their "first country." As her classmates chatter about the features they would include, Lola becomes sad and frustrated. As hard as she tries, nothing comes to mind. With Ms. Obi's prompting, Lola realizes she can reconnect to the island through the memories of the people in her community who always talk about it. By interviewing family

and neighbors, she collects and weaves pieces of their memories, integrating each into her drawing, including the blanket bats, more music than air, sleep dancing, sweet tropical fruits, and vivid colors. The illustrations beautifully portray Lola's efforts to visualize each memory, which stand in stark contrast to the wintry city in the United States where she now lives.

As she learns more about the island, my wondering about it grows, since the island is never clearly identified in the story. Bats, tropical fruits, Spanish, music, dolphins, whales, hurricanes . . . What island has all these characteristics? My curiosity peaked when Lola talked to the building superintendent, who told her, in metaphorical terms, about the dark history of the island, referring to it as the Monster. Its appearance and shape reminded me of the images in *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust* (Bunting) that keep coming back to frighten animals in the forest.

As I did my second reading, I started to carefully look for clues about the island. (I intentionally avoided looking at the Library of Congress subject headings on the copyright page.) The key clue I used to identify the island was the word Salcedo in an illustration, which appeared on the same page where Lola's neighbor, Mr. Mir, described the heroines and heroes who saved the country from the Monster. Salcedo is the birthplace of the Dominican heroines, the Mirabal sisters, who sacrificed their lives against the dictator, Rafael Trujillo. Once I figured out the identity of the island, I had more fun finding other hidden clues in the illustrations such as small flags of the Dominican Republic, a magnet of the capital city on the refrigerator, and a map of the Dominican Republic on the wall.

When Lola shares her book of memories with classmates, she proudly declares, "The island is me" (Díaz unpagged). Through a journey of collecting memories about the island, she was also constructing her own memory or identity of being islandborn. All different pieces of others' memories (happy, sad, and terrifying) helped her better understand where she is from and who she is. I believe she will continue her journey of constructing her own identity as she continues to interact with the people in her school and community.

*Islandborn* can open up many doors for parents and educators to initiate conversations on children's heritage, culture, identity, and community. As it was for Lola, children can be encouraged to interview people in the community, write or draw pictures about their findings, and read various genres of children's books to gain a more comprehensive understanding about their cultures. This book provides a comforting reminder that people can always find home, even when they feel lost and do not understand who they are: "You might not remember the island, but it remembers you" (Díaz unpagged).

### **Works Cited**

- Bunting, Eve. *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1980.
- Suárez-Orozco, Carola, and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco. *Children of Immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

### **About the Author**

**Eun Hye Son** is an associate professor in literacy, language, and culture at Boise State University. She teaches children's literature and other literacy classes. Her research focuses on critically examining multicultural literature and exploring ways of including children's literature in literacy instructions in elementary classrooms.